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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000520

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: BAKHIT CABINET'S PLANS FOR POLITICAL REFORM

REF: A. 05 AMMAN 9937

[B](#). 05 AMMAN 8823

[C](#). 05 AMMAN 8568

[D](#). 05 AMMAN 8422

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#). (C) Summary. The Bakhit cabinet has an ambitious agenda for political reform legislation, with five key bills developed in the National Agenda to be submitted to parliament in the next two months. Prominently absent from the list is a new national election law. The Prime Minister told Ambassador he was committed to reforming the law, but favored more dialogue within the country on the proposal, and saw no need to rush as the next elections for the national parliament are not due until 2007. In 2006, municipal and possibly regional elections will be conducted in the effort to enhance grassroots participation in politics. The decision on national electoral reform, and a pause in public marketing of the National Agenda, have disheartened some champions of reform, but may in the long run build stronger national consensus for the misunderstood reform process. End Summary.

[2](#). (C) Prime Minister Bakhit reiterated to Ambassador on January 23 his government's commitment to fulfill an ambitious political reform agenda. During the current parliamentary session (which ends March 31) the following draft laws will be submitted for legislative review:

--a new municipalities law, which will require that all mayors and municipal council members be elected, except for the mayor of Amman (a position that has always been an appointive one). If the law is adopted, new municipal elections will take place in April or May, 2006;

--a political parties law, now the subject of a dialogue between the government and parties;

--a strengthened anti-corruption law, which would establish an independent commission with the power to investigate cases and judge and punish violators;

--a law creating an ombudsman;

--a financial disclosure law, covering all three branches of government; and

--a national security or anti-terrorist package of laws, which will enhance the government's ability to defeat terrorists without, he said, impinging on Jordanians, civil liberties.

[3](#). (C) Missing from this list is a new national election law, a primary focus for the King during the last half of [2005](#). Bakhit appears to have persuaded the King that there is no need to rush a reformed election law, since elections for the national parliament are not scheduled until Fall, [2007](#). Bakhit wants time for a national dialogue on the draft law, and believes a rushed pace with parliament creates an avoidable backlash. The King's preoccupation with a new law stemmed from his desire to be rid of an obstructionist, anti-reform parliament. Bakhit said he believes that he will be able to get parliamentary backing for the reform agenda if he moves at a deliberate pace, consults widely, and remains distant from the polarizing pro-reform personalities -- Awadallah and Muasher -- that proved net liabilities to previous governments, efforts to promote a reform agenda. He is also focused on generating more bottom-up momentum for political reform, observing that the top-down direction had shown its pitfalls.

[4](#). (C) Some leading reformists, however, see in the slackened pace on an election law, and the notable silence of the new government on the National Agenda, a lack of commitment to genuine reform. Bakhit's political coordinator, Ali al-Ayed, told Polcouns that the National Agenda would require considerable further study by an inter-ministerial committee headed by Bakhit. Al-Ayed expected the committee to identify several priorities from among the Agenda's 2000 pages of recommendations, and seek to make them law later in 2006. A political parties law would probably be one of the priorities; electoral reform would

not. "We can't have elections under a reformed system in our current situation, when the Islamic Action front might win half the seats." (Comment: The IAF and allied independents currently hold 20 seats in the 120-member Chamber of Deputies. Their strongest showing was in 1989, when they secured 34 of 80 seats.) Before Jordan could move ahead with electoral reform, he said, it needed a new parties law, and then "some time" for non-Islamist parties to develop.

15. (C) Al-Ayed's views track with what PM Bakhit told CODEL Specter on December 26. Bakhit said he did not contemplate any changes to the electoral system until he knew "where the majority of people stand on this question" (ref A). Similarly, Chamber of Deputies Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali -- who will be a key player if parliament is asked to approve a new elections law -- told Ambassador and visiting NEA DAS Scott Carpenter on December 15 that he was not in favor of election reform that includes a national party list system until Jordanian political parties "get their house in order." A month later, over a lunch in his provincial home with Ambassador and visiting A/S Silverberg, it was clear Majali was working hard in just that direction, describing his active efforts to create a moderate nationalist party.

16. (C) In a separate meeting on January 5, Manar Dabbas, Executive Director of the Government Performance Directorate (GPD), confirmed to poloff that the roll-out of the National Agenda had been put on hold until the ministerial committee appointed by PM Bakhit had identified its reform priorities. Dabbas said that while the GPD -- which will be responsible for tracking implementation of the National Agenda within each government ministry -- remained physically in the Prime Ministry building, responsibility for its operations had been transferred to the Ministry of Public Sector Reform. Dabbas privately complained about this change, and the failure of the new cabinet to include a Minister for Government Performance, saying it would be hard for him to prod ministries to develop reform action plans without the authority of the Prime Minister's office directly behind him. Challenged on this point by the Ambassador, however, Bakhit demonstrated strong personal knowledge and support of Agenda implementation, under the direction of the Deputy Prime Minister. On his desk was a list of JD 150 million in line item projects needed to implement the Agenda. Apart from sparse resources, Bakhit lamented, many ministries lacked the capacity to move beyond listing goals into real implementation. Hence the need to pause and prioritize the Agenda, and then develop a communications plan.

17. (C) Dabbas added that he had observed a certain "backlash" against the National Agenda over the past month, even among those associated with its drafting. One such was MP Hashem Dabbas (no relation), who was among the 26 members of the Royal Commission for the National Agenda. Hashem Dabbas told poloff January 5 that he believed the Commission "had gotten too far ahead of itself" in reaching some of its recommendations.

18. (C) Comment: Once it has set its priorities within the Agenda, the government needs to mobilize public opinion behind them quickly. The recent debate and defeat of the tax reform bill showed how quickly setbacks can be dealt to reform. Recent polling by INR has demonstrated a marked lack of public understanding of and support for democratization in Jordan, so Bakhit's go-slower approach on the election law may make tactical sense from the GOJ perspective. The sequencing also matters. The King had been persuaded that a new election law was needed to jump start party formation, even as he recognized that the first round of elections would lead to strong gains by the only organized national party, the Islamic Action Front. With the prospect of early elections receding, Jordan's secular political leaders now have more time to organize. That said, in recognition of the need for greater grass-roots involvement in the political life of the country, there will be municipal and regional elections in 2006. The USG focus should be to ensure that these proceed and are real boosts to the democratization process. More broadly, handicaps stretch beyond the current parties law, however. The elite of a society whose historical experience has been only with unappealing secular parties -- Baathists, Communists, and Palestinian rejection fronts -- instinctively favors personality driven-parties focused on small-scale constituent services. Another important deterrent to organized politics is the real (and even more largely perceived) role of security services in political life. Those services are now mobilized to promote the champions of reform and those who might construct moderate nationalist parties; but would-be activists are cautious, wondering just how much room the red lines allow them, and whether the red lines might shift unpredictably in the future. End Comment.  
Hale